

Sharmaji liked nothing better than re-telling tales of yore, of his derring-do, to a young and dotting audience. And the Rathskeller in the little Swiss town, on a cold autumn evening, offered the best setting. He was seated on a bench at the middle of a long oaken table, with the youth group of the human rights seminar that had just concluded. They wanted to hear more from him, and two beautiful girls were snuggled up on either side. He was drinking his third large glass of red wine, and washing it down with a variety of whole-grain breads and swiss cheeses spread on the table. If he turned his head past the perfumed curls of one of his companions, he could see the placid stream, which ran under the window to the back.

“ Everyone holds up the Indian example as the greatest democracy in the world,” he mused, staring at the melting wax of the candle in front; “ but you must remember that people have to fight for their democratic rights, all the time, all the time, and never more so than now, when America threatens us with Re-Colonization!”

This was a familiar and popular theme. “ You said something during the conference about your personal fight with the Indian police,” suggested Joost, the Dutch boy at the table. The others leaned forward expectantly, and Sharmaji could feel the breast of the girl on his left pressed against his arm. His moment had arrived.

“ You must all have heard of the dark days of the Indian Emergency when Mrs. Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties in India, and prorogued Parliament indefinitely?” asked Sharmaji, but it was clear from the blank looks round him that they had not heard of that momentous occasion, and he could see, in fact, that several had not even been born in those times. He gave them a rough picture of what had occurred, the incarceration of all democratic leaders, including himself, he was careful to add – but he would say not a word about the tortures he himself underwent, for that was not the ‘Gandhian way,’ and in any case several other leaders had almost faced the same hardships – but it was plain to all from his words and his look that he was dissembling modestly.

“ No! But I will tell you,” said Sharmaji with emphasis, “ about an incident during that time that illustrates how quickly a democratic country with a democratic heritage of five-thousand years can be brought down to fascism!”

Yoost rose and brought back a fresh bottle of Nuveau Beaujolais, and replenished Sharmaji’s glass.

“ I had just come out of custody – in fact I escaped – but that is another story,” said Sharmaji smacking his lips, “ and I would have been re-arrested at the public meeting I addressed – what did I care in those days! I was young, and they had done all they could to me without breaking my spirit, so...but as I was saying the police were there to re-arrest me, but they received orders not to do so in front of that huge crowd – you know, there is only so much people will take? Well, a few days later, I received a phone call from the Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research to go to Delhi – I was

still a student, but my scholarship was beginning to be known – that is what I advise all young people, let us be activists, but let us also stand first in the class!”

Some sheepish glances were exchanged around him.

“ I had never been in a plane before, how could I, coming from a very poor family – you know I had to read my class-books under the street lights, since we couldn’t afford an electrical connection – Well! I was seated in this plane, afraid, but willing to try anything!”

Indulgent but at the same time respectfully appreciative laughter sounded round the table.

“ This man in the front seat, I couldn’t see his face,’ only the ‘Gandhi cap’ on his head, started abusing the Stewardess, demanding to know why the take-off had been delayed for half-an-hour – just half-an-hour, mind you – that she should call the pilot to him, he wanted a full explanation, and so on and so forth. The poor girl tried to pacify him, but he seized her roughly by the shoulder and shoved her staggering towards the cockpit door. My blood was boiling I tell you, after all I was a young man then, but I think I still would do what I did that day. I was going to rise and give him a slap, but then I knew that airline rules forbid a fight in mid-air. Even as I was debating with myself, an elderly gentleman also sitting in front said politely, ‘Doesn’t matter, Sir, we are on our way, so why don’t you relax?’

“ ‘ Relax! And who the devil are you?’ shouted the fellow, standing up, his fat face red with fury. I could see he was some kind of politician. ‘ Do you know who I am?’ he shouted for the whole plane-load of passengers to hear. ‘ I am Govind Das Munshi, a Member of Madam’s Advisory Committee!’

“A chilled silence fell all round me, for in those days Indira Gandhi’s name was associated with terror, though history has now got a more balanced view of her as a great patriot, having been misled by fellows like this Munshi. By then the co-pilot had come into the cabin. Munshi turned on him and bellowed: ‘Inform Delhi Airport and Tihar Jail that I have caught an Anti-National’ – pointing to the hapless old man – ‘He is to be transported straight to jail for interrogation!’

“That gentleman was now fully terrified. ‘ I beg you, Sir, I did not know who you were! I meant no harm!’

“ ‘You don’t have to tell me anything,’ said Munshi with a devilish look. ‘You can tell them in Tihar Jail when you are caned!’

“ I could take this no longer. ‘Fascist! Fascist Pig!’ I shouted. Govind Das Munshi’s eyes went red with hatred. ‘ How dare you, you scoundrel!’ he yelled waddling towards me. Before anyone could interfere, I had sprung forward like a leopard, and with a light touch pushed him screaming to the floor of the aisle.

“ ‘I don’t care if your fascist police assassinate me!’ I said, for as you can imagine, my blood was also boiling hot. ‘ I may die later, but you will die now, you pig. Apologize to this lady and this gentleman!’ I was young then, and I have asked forgiveness from God many times for my behaviour.” The group round the table willingly forgave him on the spot, and a few pairs of female eyes cast moist glances in his direction.

“ He was after all a bully and a coward, and he whimpered that he had only been doing his duty and begged me to spare him. ‘Take him into custody for causing trouble during a flight!’ I told the co-pilot, who was very willing to do so. The other passengers had taken courage, and assured me that they would keep a careful watch over Munshi. Though I was the youngest in the plane, my actions made me a natural leader. When we arrived at Delhi Airport, an Inspector General of Police was in attendance, and totally flabbergasted to see Govind Das Munshi take humble leave of me – a student! And you know who that old man was? He was the Managing Director of one of India’s biggest corporations in Calcutta – you can guess which one! I did get the offer of a high executive post from him, but a revolutionary does not work for corporations!”

A chorus of congratulatory laughter greeted this story, and the young people crowded round Sharmaji for more. He did tell them a few more anecdotes, but the Munshi story had been the best of the evening. Well past midnight, they all decided to go to bed, and the two girls on either side of Sharmaji supported him back to the modest hotel where they were staying. Several bottles of red wine had been emptied over the evening, and he was not quite steady on his legs. In any case, he liked their young bodies next to him, recounting on the way back over the cobblestones that Gandhiji himself had been so supported by his nieces in his old age.

They helped him take off his shoes and jacket, and while the tall blonde slipped out after kissing him good-night, the shorter dark beauty, whose breast he had felt pressed against him most of the evening, stayed back to tuck him in. His eyes were glazing in a golden haze of wine and fiction, when she leaned over him, her face indistinct and inches away, and whispered from far away: “ Shall I stay, dear Sharmaji?” but he was far away in his own world, and he felt her lips lightly on his, and then she was gone, switching off the light.

It had been a great evening, full of admiration, food and wine, he could ask for no more. With every telling the Munshi story became more real in his mind, taking on ever many more details, his mind hearing the words spoken so long ago even more clearly, seeing the events in all their sharp and new detail. Somewhere, in some corner of his mind, like an un-believed fast-fading version of some ancient myth, was a bleached-out memory of his old history professor telling him a tale of shame in a breaking voice, of such an incident when the whole plane had sat in cowed silence while the corporate executive was marched off to jail. But his version was more true, if not in fact, then in his own mind, for he Willed it to be true. By re-telling the story his way he had gloriously removed the stigma of shame from his professor and all other passengers on that plane, and ruined Munshi’s reputation one more time by historical rumour, in revenge for the evil he had wrought that day.

